



Preface

The Committee's Terms of Reference

On 22 March 1979 the Senate referred to the Committee for inquiry and report the reference 'Australia and ASEAN'.

The Inquiry

In April 1979 the Committee invited submissions on the reference by placing advertisements in major newspapers and journals in Australia and the member countries of ASEAN. It also wrote to individuals in Australia and overseas, academic institutions, commercial firms and their associations, organisations, Commonwealth government departments and instrumentalities. Hearings commenced on 4 September 1979, concluded on 5 June 1980, involving fourteen days of public hearings and six in camera sessions. The Committee conducted hearings on the reference in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney.

The invitations for submissions brought a good response and eighty-seven were received. The majority originated from Australian sources with some contributions from people in the ASEAN countries. It has been the Committee's experience that an increasing number of Commonwealth government departments fail to meet the due date for submissions, in some cases by many months. The Committee appreciates that the Parliament and its Committees are placing greater demands on departments but the delays are an unfortunate trend and can unnecessarily lengthen the duration of an inquiry. The ASEAN diplomatic missions in Australia and their State offices contributed to the Committee's deliberations in the course of informal discussions, provided information material and regularly attended the public hearings.

The Committee felt that for this reference views and information from the ASEAN countries were necessary to balance the material derived from Australian sources. To obtain this, and as only a few written contributions were received from people in the ASEAN countries, the Committee sought the Prime Minister's assistance to visit the ASEAN countries. This request was refused and as a result three Committee members together made a private visit. The Prime Minister's permission was sought for the Committee Secretary to accompany the Committee members on their visit, but this was also refused. The information gathered during the visit proved most valuable and subsequently provided the Committee with a first-hand record of how people and leaders in ASEAN countries view Australian-ASEAN relations.

Summary of conclusions and recommendations

The formation of ASEAN in 1967 brought together five South East Asian nations with diverse features. The evolution of the Association has been cautious and progress in achieving its aims has been more successful in some fields than in others. Since the mid 1970s a revitalised ASEAN has acquired international recognition as a regional grouping and now tends to increasingly express the views of its members on a collective basis.

Just as the Association is evolving so are Australian-ASEAN relations, they involve exchanges in the political, economic, security, cultural and development assistance fields. While in the main relations are still conducted on a bilateral basis there is an increasing tendency for ASEAN to be used as a vehicle for presenting the interests of one or more of its members. Economic issues dominate relations between Australia and the ASEAN countries. It is in this area that most of the differences in relations arise, especially on the subject of Australia's trading policies. Currently Australia and the ASEAN countries are not major trading partners but it is in Australia's interests to develop opportunities for greater trade with these countries. Australia has introduced measures to facilitate trade with ASEAN countries, however their perceptions of Australian trade barriers limiting market access remain an impediment in economic relations. This need to provide greater market access does not call for 'special' treatment to be extended to any one country or group, it should be non-discriminatory.

The Australian development assistance program is an important component of the relationship, it concentrates on project assistance, training and technical assistance. The development assistance priorities of the ASEAN countries are changing and Australia must ensure that its program has the adaptability in those circumstances for its assistance to remain effective and relevant. The assistance is not offered as a panacea for the differences that exist in Australia's relations with the ASEAN countries. Defence co-operation is another aspect of Australia's relations with each ASEAN country, and although modest in scope it supports diplomatic relations. The program responds to security needs, within its capacity to assist, and in the present circumstances there is no requirement for a major Australian military role in the region. Australia's contribution towards regional security should continue to concentrate on assisting efforts to find peaceful solutions to security problems. Educational, cultural and sporting aspects of Australian-ASEAN relations develop greater mutual understanding and should be promoted and supported as important elements in the relationship.

It is important for Australia to establish sound long-term relations with the ASEAN countries, mutual understanding can and must be improved. As leaders and governments change, better appreciation of each other's attitudes and policies will make adjustment to the changes easier. In the ASEAN countries new leaders could possibly have attitudes that differ from the present attitudes towards Australia and ASEAN. Australia must take into account these possibilities and recognise their relevance to future relations. Australia's relations with ASEAN encompass most aspects of its foreign relations and on a broad basis are harmonious. While differences exist and periodically arise there are many areas in the relationship where interests coincide.

When differences exist or develop there is, therefore, a mutual obligation for the respective views to be recognised and treated in ways which will provide acceptable solutions, understanding must be a two-way process. Australia's approach to ASEAN should not be deferential. Australia has the right to determine what is best in its national interest.

It is the Committee's assessment that Australia should continue to regard the Association as an important, friendly grouping of States with which Australia will want to pursue a sound long-term relationship based on mutual respect. However, there is no suggestion that a 'special' relationship exists or should be fostered. A relationship of this type can nurture false hopes and expectations which cannot always be fulfilled and can be construed by others as discriminatory in the context of Australia's overall foreign relations. It must be accepted that there are occasions when Australia and ASEAN act to serve their own interests in a manner which may be opposed to the other's interests.

Policy co-ordination

The Committee considers the requirement for effective policy co-ordination is vital to furthering relations with the Association and its members and therefore recommends that:

- (i) priority be given to developing policy-making processes to effectively co-ordinate the interdependent elements of domestic and foreign policies;
- (ii) consultative procedures in policy co-ordination should be broadened to promote close liaison with the non-government sector when the issues involve them; and
- (iii) to meet the growing demands of Australian-ASEAN relations, Australia's diplomatic missions in the region be provided with adequate staff and resources to ensure that policies are effectively implemented.

Economic relations

The Committee recommends that emphasis be given to developing economic policies as they are a key element in the relationship and serve both ASEAN and Australian long-term interests. This should include carefully explaining Australia's position on tariffs, including domestic implications, commitment to tariff reductions and responsibilities to the Australian community.

Trading relations

The Committee recommends that the general approach to preferences should continue where it is practical and mutually beneficial keeping in mind the considerations referred to by the Treasury in its evidence.

Business co-operation

The Committee acknowledges government initiatives and assistance to encourage Australian enterprises to develop industry links with ASEAN members and recommends that continuing support be given to promoting and strengthening co-operation with industry for this purpose.

Labour relations

The Committee supports the proposal for a Labour Attache, with the appropriate background and qualifications, in the ASEAN region and recommends that the Government, in consultation with industry and the ASEAN governments, should examine the proposal.

Data on trade flows

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government should give further consideration to providing more detailed statistics on the balance of payments with ASEAN countries particularly to serve industry needs.

Prospects for trade development

The Committee recommends that Australia should continue to stress its commitment to the reduction of trade barriers on a reciprocal and non-preferential basis and intensify its efforts to achieve such reductions.

Development assistance

The Committee recommends that the Government should continually review the relevance and significance of development assistance in Australia's relations with ASEAN and with the individual member countries. The Committee also recommends that the Government ensure the necessary resources be made available for the effective operation of the development assistance program and allow for adaptability to the changing needs of recipient countries.

Immigration

The Committee is concerned that Australia is still seen as a European outpost in an Asian region. The Committee believes it is imperative for Australia to remove this impression and recommends that the Government concentrate on projecting Australia's identity which is evolving through the changing structure of its society. The Committee also recommends the further development of the immigration policy along the lines recently adopted, a humanitarian approach to the needs of refugees and the intensification of efforts to finalise the reunion in Australia of families from East Timor.

Narcotics control

The Committee fully supports any programs and proposals aimed at effective narcotics control and it recommends that particular emphasis be given to such endeavours and that any initiatives or opportunities to assist international efforts in this field should not be hampered by arbitrary decisions on staff restraints or budgetary limitations.

Radio Australia

The Committee is concerned that the Indonesian Government refused to renew a visa for the Australian Broadcasting Commission's journalist in the country. This situation can only be harmful to bilateral relations and the Committee recommends that the Government initiate further discussions with the Indonesian authorities to ensure that Radio Australia has a correspondent in Indonesia.

Asian studies in Australia

The Committee recommends that the Government implement the proposals of the Committee on Asian Studies, to establish an Asian Studies Council to promote Asian studies at all levels.

Education

The Committee recommends that every effort be made by the Australian Government to meet requests from the ASEAN countries for assistance in education, particularly the teaching of English.

Institutions, organisations and schemes

The Committee commends the work being carried out by institutions, organisations and schemes, and considers they make a valuable contribution to the region as well as promoting understanding and co-operation. It recommends that their work continue to be supported by the Government and that support be expanded wherever possible in response to the needs indicated by the ASEAN countries. The Committee also draws attention to its earlier recommendation on the proposed Asian Studies Council.

Interest in Australian studies in the region

ASEAN countries have made it known that they would like to have more Australian publications for their students. The Committee considers that the provision of these materials containing detailed information on Australia would create greater interest and awareness of Australia in the ASEAN countries. The Committee recommends that the Government meet the needs for this material as indicated by the ASEAN countries.

Information material

Australian publications are seen by the Committee as an important means of disseminating information about Australia in the ASEAN region, and it recommends that a wider variety and a larger quantity of material be made available for distribution.